

Universities

The collaboration challenge

The role of a university is increasingly linked to economic performance and a knowledge society. Arising from this relationship, collaboration has become an essential requisite in teaching, research and management. Yet, meaningful partnership is some way off for most universities.

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The relationship between third and fourth level education and the economy is well established in national policy. For example, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's recent Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation has strongly influenced the design of Cycle 4 of the HEA's Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLII). In this and other university funds, collaboration has become a key criterion for funding. At present, most national and international funding (e.g., SIF, SFI, PRTLII, FP7, the Wellcome Trust, and numerous other private sources) supports collaborative effort as a priority.

In a recent example, Wyeth Pharmaceuticals announced an investment of £33 million to support Translational Medicine Research Collaboration between four Scottish universities, the NHS, and a number of industry partners. In coming to a decision, Wyeth heralded the strength of medical and life sciences research

in Scotland's universities, and their close working relationship with the NHS. While this investment represented a lost opportunity for Ireland, it is a clear demonstration of the potential for such exciting and lucrative collaborative opportunities.

Collaboration describes any number or type of different partnerships – internal and external, formal and informal – and personal relationships. It works on a regional, national or international basis. Its benefits are numerous: collaborative work supports higher-impact outcomes in all its aspects; provides access to cumulative levels of investment and knowledge that exceed individual effort and thereby provide greater returns; creates knock-on opportunities for further collaboration once a relationship has been established; and is a hugely important tool in assisting universities to meet target numbers of PhD students, high impact publications and improve their overall academic and management performance.

However, the absolute benefits of investment in collaboration are to Ireland Inc. Collaboration strengthens national performance, by achieving systemic synergies and reducing the duplication and fragmentation that is currently evident in Ireland's universities. Seven universities working in sync with one another would be a clear case of a whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

While most institutions, academics and researchers have built their own networks and collaborations (most recently the NGMEP) and the Government has provided substantial financial incentives, further effort is required to develop collaboration in a more cohesive and meaningful way. Ireland has not established a strong track record for meaningful collaboration at third and fourth level and there are many opportunities and challenges that could be grasped.

For example, the networks developed through student recruitment campaigns in Asia could provide substantial opportunity for further collaboration at third and fourth level. In addition, Ireland performed notably well in competitions for the European Marie Curie funding. This provides opportunities that might be translated into substantial international collaborative relationships.

The German universities of Heidelberg and Mannheim are adopting the ultimate collaborative approach by jointly planning for the higher education requirements of the region in which they are located. There are clear benefits to be gained from this partnership approach to planning and management, yet, here in Ireland it still seems such a radical approach that may take universities into uncharted waters.

If the Government and our universities wish to pursue collaboration seriously, a robust national policy and framework is necessary. This would provide the mechanisms and structures to encourage and enable collaborative efforts, while also being flexible enough to support a range of joint initiatives in teaching, research, management and commercial activities.

For institutions, the framework would address or include guidelines to successful collaboration that would encompass: strong leadership and a clear vision for pursuing collaboration; a clear

statement of the purpose and mutual benefits to be gained from partnership; a formal collaborative agreement stating the legal and organisational structure, strategy, financial and operational requirements; clarity on the objectives, targets, indicators and outcomes of the collaboration; provision for frequent and meaningful interaction and active liaison; agreement on financial commitments and outcomes; and the flexibility to encourage creativity and a positive approach to accommodate further collaborative efforts.

At the local level, university leaders must promote such efforts on their campuses, using convincing arguments (if we don't do it somebody else will!), and enabling an integrated approach to collaboration that could bring university collaboration to a new level.

The Government has provided the financial incentive. The next step is a clear and integrated purpose. The onus is on the HEA and university leaders to make best use of collaborative funding, as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Deirdre O'Mara is a Director of Consulting in Prospectus. Deirdre specialises in strategy development and organisation change. She has a specific understanding of the strategies, structures and processes required to optimise all aspects of university collaboration.

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Article at a glance

An emphasis on collaboration is being driven by the growing link between third and fourth level education, academic excellence and economic success.

This link is driving funding criteria which seek to support collaborative efforts.

While universities have established collaborative networks, further effort is required to develop collaboration in a more meaningful way.

A national framework, providing policy and guidance, could bring collaborative efforts by Irish universities to a new level.